

Momentum

by Kay Albrecht

“Reading Staff Dissatisfaction Cues”

Walk with me into a center—the air is heavy with tension, more children are crying than normal, an angry parent is waiting to see the director, and three staff resignations are sitting on the desk! The bewildered director asks: “How did this happen? Just last week we were humming along merrily—fully staffed, fully enrolled, and looking forward to a good month. What happened?” After talking with the resigning staff members and the angry parent, the director finds out that the center has been a boiling cauldron ready to overflow for weeks. Staff are unhappy; parents are perceiving the staff’s dissatisfaction and identifying their own concerns; children who are normally just healthy, challenging children are pushing every limit—even the custodian isn’t doing what needs to be done.

How did it go this far? What happened to unsettle the whole center system? Could this blowout and the fallout that will certainly result from it have been prevented? What cues did the director have of the impending disaster? It is my premise that there were plenty of cues. But for some reason, these cues were not received in time to do something about them. Let’s take a look at some strategies for preventing situations like the one described above by insuring that the director is not the last one to know.

By definition, teachers and directors have different world views. Teachers have a micro view of the center world—they are sensitive to what goes on with their assigned children, the parents who come in and out of their classroom each day, the teaching team members who work together planning and then implementing curricula, and the world within the physical boundaries of their classroom. Directors have a macro view—they see the sum of the

parts, the big picture, the way policies and procedures affect different children, families, and teachers; the impact of change in one sphere of operation on the other spheres; and the equilibrium of the whole center.

Because of this basic difference in orientation, staff are the perfect barometer of the center’s overall health. Teachers aren’t supposed to look at the big picture—they are supposed to focus their energy and efforts on the world of their classroom. When they do so and are satisfied with the results, children are busy and well cared for. If they are dissatisfied with the results, for whatever reason, this dissatisfaction will leak out of the classroom into the rest of the center. Let’s look at some things the director can do to insure that staff dissatisfaction is uncovered and identified before it discombobulates the whole center system.

Observe for dissatisfaction cues—really observe—regularly. Directors need to be astute observers of the center milieu. But when they are looking for dissatisfaction cues, the observation needs to take a more focused approach. Don’t try to observe for dissatisfaction cues when you are evaluating teachers, looking for classroom maintenance needs, checking for the lunch count, or passing through on your way to the rest room. Make this observation a participatory one. Go into the classroom and work along side of your teachers. See their jobs as they see it.

A personal example. Recently, a teacher was out due to a family emergency. Although we had a substitute, I wanted to help, so I went into the toddler room during the transition to lunch and nap.

Surefire Signs of Staff Dissatisfaction

- Increases in tardiness or absenteeism without prior notification
- Lack of attention to details like where children's shoes and socks are located or what happened to the new manipulative toy
- Room arrangements that look just like they did last month or last year
- Defensive responses to feedback from peers, parents, or supervisors
- Changes in productivity levels as indicated by out of date curriculum plans or incomplete materials requests
- Lack of follow through in usual routines like playground pickup, returning toys to central storage, etc.
- Cabinets whose contents fall on your head when the doors are opened

Frustration was not far away. I found out that I didn't know which lunch box belonged to whom (regardless of the fact we request that parents label everything they bring to the center), I was useless in helping toddlers get to sleep because I was unfamiliar with their calm down routines and couldn't identify which mat belonged to which child or locate the "right" blanket or security toy, and I was reminded just how hard it really is to clean up five toddlers at once after they have eaten lunch. But the real lesson learned was that a substitute in the toddler room has a really hard time being very useful. And, as a result, the remaining staff have a truly tough day because substitute help is so unhelpful!

Now, no center director can prevent staff absence. But the way substitutes are used and the extra support given classrooms with substitutes is definitely the purview of the director. Insight into the realities of the problem came from participating in—not just observing—how rough it was to compensate for an absent staff member.

Identify frustration points. Different teachers will become frustrated over different things. Knowledge of the "hot buttons" for each staff member is a critical piece of information for a center director. Unresolved frustration can be the source of much dissatisfaction. If you know what frustrates a staff member, you can work hard to prevent it as much as possible or at least anticipate its occurrence. How do you find out? Try asking! Add a question about "things that frustrate me" to your current teacher self-evaluation tool. Also, use a similar question during interviews with applicants for teaching vacancies.

Vary the techniques used to measure dissatisfaction. Put out an anonymous suggestion box in the staff lounge. Or hold a blank agenda staff meeting where you listen and teachers ask questions, raise issues, and confront problems. If you let the structure of the meeting emerge, rather than determining it in the beginning, you may get lots of data about frustration and dissatisfaction. Establish only one ground rule—if you bring up a problem, you must suggest at least one solution. This rule will keep the meeting from becoming a gripe session.

Take action on dissatisfaction. Knowledge is the key to problem prevention. Now that you know some techniques for identifying staff dissatisfaction, use them to find latent crisis and to take action *before* dissatisfaction takes hold and permeates your center.

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